



TITLE:

<Special Feature "Nakba after Sixty Years: Memories and Histories in Palestine and East Asia"> Canaanites, Christians, and the Palestinian Agricultural Calendar

AUTHOR(S):

QLEIBO, Ali

---

CITATION:

QLEIBO, Ali. <Special Feature "Nakba after Sixty Years: Memories and Histories in Palestine and East Asia"> Canaanites, Christians, and the Palestinian Agricultural Calendar. イスラーム世界研究 2009, 3(1): 9-20

ISSUE DATE:

2009-07

URL:

<https://doi.org/10.14989/87468>

RIGHT:

## Canaanites, Christians, and the Palestinian Agricultural Calendar

Ali Qleibo\*

Classical ethnographers, such as Hilma Granqvist, Tewfik Canaan, late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century photographers, archaeologists, and travellers believed that the portrayal of Palestinian culture would provide the ethnographic context of the New Testament. It was assumed that Christian beliefs provided the spiritual basis that informed the customs, manners, religious cultic practices, social values, agriculture, classification of land use, aesthetics and styles of architecture itself derived from the Canaanite genius.

On the mountaintop of al-Saeer Village, at an altitude of 1,115 metres, a petrified fossil maple tree (*qayqab*) stands surrounded by a few oak trees. A simple stone fence surrounds the trunk of the tree and sets it apart from the adjacent oak trees. With the passage of time huge branches had fallen off but they stay on the ground untouched. Though homes use wood as fuel no one would take away the dry broken branches. This is a sacred tree. I had glimpsed similar stone fences surrounding the trunk of ancient oak trees around Petra in Jordan and had inquired about their significance only to get evasive answers.

In al-Saeer, the village where Esau son of Jacob is buried, the villagers complained.

“Twenty five years ago,” Abu Hamzeh said, “an ancient rectangular pillar (altar) stood in front of *al-qayqab* tree. Here our parents would make their offering of tomatoes and squash [...] the produce of the land.”

To an anthropologist familiar with Robertson Smith’s works, the ancient Semitic distinction between vegetable offerings and blood offerings comes immediately to mind.

“The custom continued until Israeli soldiers came one day and carried the stone away.” I hear the pain of impotence in his voice.

“What did the stone look like?” I wanted to visualize what I deduced to be a sacrificial altar.

“It was rectangular and had ancient writings inscribed on it. When it was taken away the custom of offering vegetables stopped, but people continue to pay homage and recite al-Fatihah (the first chapter of the Qur’an) as they pass by the tree.”

“Our father Abraham had rested under the tree; hence its sanctity,” Abu Hamzeh fumbled an explanation.

“This is superstition!” the bearded fundamentalist brother of Abu Hamzah protested. “An ignorant custom inherited from the old days of ignorance!” he added.

The fossil tree stands panoramically on *al-tur*, the mountaintop, as every elevated

---

\* Al-Quds University (Jerusalem).

mountain summit is called in local Arabic. *Al-Tur* in Jerusalem refers to the upper part of the Mount of Olives. The word *al-tur* refers to the mountaintop in Sinai associated with the revelation of the tablets to Prophet Moses. Within the precincts of the *qayqab* tree, numerous ancient Canaanite burial caves survive.

In his classic work, *The Religion of the Semites*,<sup>1</sup> Robertson Smith singles out trees, caves, water wells, and mountaintops as being imbued with a certain spiritual charisma. They are sacred in the sense that the local supplicants have faith in the special *barakeh* that certain trees, rocks, caves, water wells, or men exude. *Barakeh* is a rather complex Moslem concept whose referential value encompasses grace, blessing, and the ability to intercede between man and God. The power to answer the pleas of the supplicants is explained as *karamah*. God is generous with these holy men and responds to their intercessions.

El Qwedrieh, on the outskirts of Halhul, is a primeval cave standing in the shadow of an ancient oak tree amidst the stone rubble of an old structure. Both are believed to have supernatural holy powers. Trees can be sacred in their own right or in conjunction with a holy man (*wali*) and can form a complex of Holy Man, Tree, and Water Well, such as in Sheikh Salah Sanctuary, eight kilometres north of Dhahiryeh. In *Mohammedan Saints and Sanctuaries in Palestine*,<sup>2</sup> Tewfik Canaan describes the veneration of different kinds of trees in Mandate Palestine.

\* \* \*

In Moslem Palestinian villages this Semitic concept of animism (which is highly reminiscent of the Japanese Shinto concept of *kami*, spirit) is encompassed within the Arabic understanding of *barakeh*. Pagan Canaanite symbols and rites survive into modernity camouflaged in biblical symbolism and/or in conjunction with the local vernacular understanding of Moslem sainthood; holy men. In Christian villages such as Bethlehem, Beit Jala, and Beit Sahour, sacred water wells, caves, and rocks are legitimized through association with the apparition of the Virgin Mary in whose honour a church is constructed *in situ*. Moslem supplicants are tolerated to visit, pray, light candles, and give offerings to the Virgin Mary.

Though narratives that describe the miraculous apparition of the Virgin Mary vary, the theme follows the same pattern. The Virgin Mary would invariably appear to a simple Moslem peasant unfamiliar with Christian iconography. In the case of Beit Sahour, a grape vendor from al-Saeer slept overnight by the cave. During the night he saw a woman with children going into the well. Thinking that the woman had committed suicide and fearing that people would suspect his involvement, he returned to his village. A few days later he

---

1 W. Robertson Smith. 1894. *The Religion of the Semites: Lectures on the Fundamental Institutions*. London : A. and C. Black.

2 Tewfik Canaan. 1927. *Mohammedan Saints and Sanctuaries in Palestine*. Jerusalem: Ariel Pub. House.

inquired about the fate of the woman who had thrown herself into the well with the children. The local Christians then explained to him his vision. Additional apparitions of the Virgin further validated the well as sacred and precipitated the building of a church on the site. Since the Virgin is greatly revered among Moslems too, the water well, marked as a church for Christians, has assumed the status of a holy shrine for Moslems and is regularly visited by supplicants from Mount Hebron Moslem peasants and Ta'amreh Bedouins.

In contemporary Palestinian culture, Christian symbolism and Canaanite animism are intertwined under the veneer of Islam to such an extent as to dissolve causality. Only through extensive philological, archaeological ethnological research can we have sufficient evidence to fathom the extent to which ancient Semitic religious practices mixed with Greco Roman paganism and survived in Christian forms or, conversely, to see that ontologically Christian rituals had been disconnected from their Christian associations and had developed under the Moslem umbrella into an independent institution. In the absence of ethnographic or archaeological records of ancient Semitic practices rituals homologous to now typically Christian symbolism cannot be scientifically isolated and analyzed as part of an evolutionary process but as variant historical expressions.

Highly symbolic concepts such as *saleeb*, the cross on which Jesus was crucified, is revealed to have a referential value deeply embedded in the Palestinian perception and classification of nature. Native exegesis yields an interpretation of key Christian symbols independent of associations we have come to expect in Christianity. The question whether the native exegesis is a secondary interpretation of a practice to an occulted system or whether it constitutes "real" interpretation remains polemic.

"The agricultural year begins after the wheat harvest is over." Sarah from Beit Suriq was describing the traditional peasant agricultural calendar. "We start ploughing the land and preparing it for rainfall from *Eid al-Saleeb* and continue until *Eid Lood*."

The Christian celebration of the Apparition of the Cross is known in Arabic as *Eid al-Saleeb*, literally the Feast of the Cross.

"Doesn't *saleeb* (cross) have Christian associations?" I prodded Sarah.

"There is no relationship whatsoever!" Sarah, an observant Moslem, vehemently denied any possible association of the word "cross" to Christianity.

"*Saleeb* is derived from the word *salaba*. It refers to the final stage of maturation of the fruits. It takes place towards the end of the summer season when the grapes turn extremely sweet, when figs ripen and the pomegranate (*bisalbu*) cracks open to reveal the kernel inside."

I double-checked her interpretation with my other friends in Dura, Burj, Um Salamonah, Halhul, Ramime, Sur Baher, Kharas, Kufr al-Deek, and Beit Ummar. Their answers corroborated Sarah's linguistic analysis.

"The Arabic word *saleeb* comes from the triadic root SLB which has the referential

value synonymous with the word ‘essence’.” Abu Ali from Dura pointed out to me. “In Arabic we say *sulb al mawdu*’, which means the essence of the subject matter, its kernel, in other words its “hidden value.”

“When the pomegranate *bitsalleb*, it means it has reached the acme of its sweetness and marks the end of the long maturation process.”

\* \* \*

In the Palestinian agricultural calendar, *Eid al-Saleeb* overlaps with the date marked on the Christian calendar as the Apparition of the Cross, 14 September. Without scientific knowledge of the history of the development of the Palestinian agricultural calendar, Aramaic and Canaanite language, and the ancient Greco-Semitic seasonal fertility rituals within their variant ethnographic context, our knowledge remains tentative.

The cracking open of the pomegranate, in September, in the shape similar to a cross to be followed by the first rainfall must have left a great impression on our ancestors. The natural phenomenon heralded the new season; time to begin ploughing the land in preparation for the coming of the rainy season. September rain, *matar al-saleeb*, is a common idiom that literally translates into English as “the rain of the cross.”

This seasonal transition from the dry summer to the wet winter is accompanied by the *tasalub*, the cracking open of the pomegranates. In antiquity this liminal period may have been accompanied by religious cultic rituals. Could *Eid al-Saleeb* have had an existence prior to this Christian celebration of the cross of Jesus? Our knowledge of *saleeb* nowadays is already biased by our knowledge of the New Testament. On the other hand, we do not have ethnography of the pre-Biblical Palestinians. The referential values of the Aramaic root SLB, as used in everyday language, remain unknown.

I continued my interview with Sarah in order to reconstruct the Palestinian peasant agricultural calendar. Next I had to find the meaning of *Eid Lood* and assign to it a time period in the Gregorian calendar.

“It has been a long time [...] when we still lived in Beit Shinneh.” Sarah was trying to remember the exact pronunciation and spelling of the word.

“Maybe it was *Eid Lid*?” I inquired trying to find a relationship between her pronunciation and the name of the coastal town.

“The word sounds something like “Lood” or “Lod.”

She could not remember the exact sound or spelling.

In traditional anthropology, the ethnographer bases his/her data on the information gleaned from subjective experience. Participant observation is the methodological tool of knowledge. The scientific paradigm and the school of anthropology in which the ethnographer had been trained provide the scientific framework within which his/her perception and interpretation of the data would proceed. Since classical anthropology developed within the

context of pre-literate societies, most of these studies concerned themselves with synchronic a-historical study of the human condition. In the study of the Palestinians the situation is extremely complex. The anthropologist must conduct a parallel academic research of the various civilizations and peoples that had settled throughout the ages in Palestine.

The coastal village of Lod and the West Bank village of al-Khader are historically associated with the cult of St. George. The two churches of St. George, a traditional seasonal pilgrimage centre, have assumed the status of sacred shrines for Palestinian Moslems as well. St. George is known locally as al-Khader, the green one. The Moslem/Christian figure is intimately related to rain and fertility and, to a great extent, to the Canaanite god of rain, Baal. In Lod there is a cave under the apse which has in the middle a cenotaph of the saint. In a Franciscan manuscript titled “Tabula Imperii Romani: Judaea – Palaestina,” the author lists the town’s variant names—Lod, Lydda, Diospolis, Georgiopolis. Moreover he observes that before the cenotaph was built, there had been a cave where the women used to go to pray and to light candles in honour of St. George.

According to the calendar of the Jerusalem Church, its annual feast is celebrated on November 3. The date commemorates the dedication of the church and the deposition of the relics. In the Palestinian consciousness *Eid Lod* is associated with the onset of rainfall. The perception that *aylul danabuh mablul*, which translates into English as “the tail end of September is wet,” is a common proverb and helps situate the dates of *Eid al-Saleeb* and *Eid Lod* between September 14 and November 3. That the cave itself, prior to the building of the church, was already a holy shrine provides further insights into the persistence of Semitic religious fertility cults within Christian-Moslem iconography. Significantly in this festival, lamb sacrifice is practiced by local Christians—a ritual that does not exist in the Christian Church.

*Eid Lod* is a seasonal turning point and heralds the imminent advent of the rainy winter season. The local saying, *Shid ya fallah shid ma baqa lal-shita t'id*, which translates as “move hard with your land work, peasant, for there is no more time to count before the winter sets in,” reminds the peasant that the countdown for winter is over. After *Eid Lod* the frequency of rainfall increases in intensity until St. Barbara’s feast (*Eid al-Barbarah*), which falls on 4 December, when the heavy downpour of rain fills even the mouse holes: *Fi Eid al-Barbara btitla’ el ma’y min khuzuq al-farah*.

“*Eid Lod* marks the seasonal onset of the dissemination of the seeds (alufar),” continued Sarah. “This is the time for planting lentils, barley, and wheat. By *Eid el Milad* (Christmas) all field work will be finished.”

The twenty-first of December marks the longest night of the year and the beginning of *al-marbaniyyeh*, the forty coldest days.

The forty cold days are followed by the fifty cold days, which in turn are followed by

the *khamsinieh*, the fifty hot, dusty days, which begin by 21 March and whose end marks the beginning of summer proper. The fifty cold days are divided into four periods: *sa'd*, literally the four fortunes, punctuating the fluctuating temperatures and the increasing rate of growth of the cereals, legumes, and the return of life to the grey trees. April is noted for its four festive Thursdays. On the first Thursday of April, *Khamis al-Mawtaa*, i.e., Thursday of the Dead, peasants commemorate the dead. Cemeteries are visited and special sweets are given as offerings to the widows, the needy, and the children. The second Thursday in the month of April is known as *Khamis al-Bade*, which is translated as The Thursday of the Eggs.”

The Thursday of the Eggs is a children’s festival. Traditionally children would sing special songs while dying eggs. The eggs are dyed green by boiling them with mint, or brown by boiling them with dry onion peel. Each family would bring its own homemade food into the village square, the usual gathering place. The children would compete in cracking the eggs in a joyful festive mood.

Thursday of the Dead and Thursday of the Eggs overlap within the period of Easter. Were we to take Christianity as our point of reference, the ritual celebration of death and life one week from each other may be construed as a Christian vestige. Were we to take Canaanite culture as defining the agricultural calendar, then Passion Week, including Good Friday and Easter, may be interpreted as a local Christian variant of an ancient Semitic rite of spring. The sequence of the social rituals that mark death and life as symbolically re-enacted in the commemoration of the dead and the celebration of life may be elements in “pagan” ancient Semitic cultic rituals. However, without archaeological data that would reveal the presence of coloured eggs among ancient Canaanites or even in travellers’ descriptions of this custom, our interpretation remains highly conjectural.

The Palestinian peasants proffer their own interpretation of the Thursday of the Eggs.

After the seeds are planted in November and December, nature comes to a standstill. The temperature falls and the rainfall intensifies; frost and snow are common in this period. “*Al-Marbaniyyeh* stretches for forty days.” Sarah paused as she sought the words with which she could describe the intense wet cold grey January weather. These are the shortest and coldest days of the year.

No one travels anymore. We stay around the house. Children are rarely bathed and only in the daytime for fear of colds. There is little work in the fields. Even the chickens stop laying eggs. No one ventures into the fields until *Eid al Ghitas*, baptism celebrations, in the middle of February when the warming trend begins.

The *Marbaniyyeh* ends in early February. A cold wind heralds this shift but a warming trend begins. Despite the heavy rain and the characteristic wet mud, February is the harbinger

of the summer: *shbat bikhabet u bilabbet u rihet el seif fih*. By this time the cereals would have grown above the earth. It is the time when vegetables such as lettuce and spinach and tomatoes may be planted. Although it is warm, extremely cold spells could follow, and this is detrimental to the crops ... Should it snow or should frost form, the fresh saplings would die. Sarah explained:

During this period, the fifty cold days, the night becomes shorter and daylight gradually increases. Plants begin to grow in size. Chickens begin to lay eggs again. These eggs are saved. When a hundred or a hundred and fifty eggs are collected, then the Thursday of the Eggs is celebrated.

\* \* \*

Cultural anthropology is an interpretive qualitative study. Ethnologists depend on data that they either glean from first-hand observation or on information supplied by the natives as their point of departure. The study of Palestinian culture is rather complex because its structure has been constituted through various historical epochs, each of which has bequeathed literary discourses that form the basis of the Judaeo-Christian – Moslem spiritualism, i.e., the people of the Book. So far archaeology, apart from the myth of Baal Hadaad, has not yet unearthed literature pertaining to the other ethnic groups of Palestine.

As a native anthropologist my subjectivity is compromised on the personal collective level and on a theological level. On the one hand, I cannot overlook the role the Judaeo-Christian culture and its Canaanite predecessor has played in providing the blueprint that informs our way of life. Nevertheless I cannot be insensible to the effect of the various historical influences on the constant reshaping of our cultural identity and our self-image. The Moslem religion, whose calendar is totally divorced from the local Palestinian seasonal punctuation of time and Arabic culture, has re-structured our life. Moreover Moslem Arab historiography traditionally disavows our pagan pre-Islamic culture and religion. Our narrative assigns the advent of Islam as our true beginning.

The rupture with the classical ancient civilizations has been of cataclysmic proportions. I travel in the villages like a rescue team visiting a site that has sustained numerous major earthquakes. Within the new topography fossils of the old terrain embedded in the folds of protruding strata provide evidence of a past reality. Similarly I constantly run into symbols, rituals, and social practices that reveal the pre-historic roots of Palestinian culture in their ancestral Semitic and non-Semitic cultures.

Ancient Canaanites had forged the first spiritual relationship with Palestine. Their initial perception of Palestine's geography: the rocks, caves, water springs, and trees have come to imbue the holy land with its mythos. Their perception, intuition, and interaction



with the natural environment, structured and conditioned the unique socio-economic system, religion, and spiritual legacy that the diverse Semitic and non-Semitic ethnic later settlers adapted themselves to. The dynamic process of ecological adaptation to an ever-shifting environment, the cultural diversity of which the Canaanite nascent city-states were composed, and the influences of the various peoples with whom the Palestinians came into contact have never ceased. The rain-dependant frail ecosystem, which is vulnerable to dramatic climatic changes, has dynamically prodded an ever-shifting process of adaptations. These peoples are innumerable and include the Hurrites, Jebusites, Canaanites, Hebrews, Edomites, Arameans, and Arabs. Ancient non-Semitic peoples were composed of diverse Greeks from Crete, Ionia, the Black Sea, Anatolia, and Lydia, and were followed by Hellenic Greeks, Roman legions, Persians, Byzantines, Crusaders, Kurds, Turks. In modern history Egyptians, British, Jordanians, and Israelis played an ever-increasing role in reorganizing the ecological system, expanding our resources in new directions, and reshaping Palestinian modern identity. Heirs to all these peoples and cultures, Palestinians can claim neither racial genetic purity nor ontological cultural homogeneity.

My friends in al-Samuu or Yatta consider themselves Qaysi, i.e., pure Arabs from Hijaz. They have genealogical charts tracing their tribal origins in the Arabian Desert. However, they, as well as the majority of pure Qaysi Arabs, are mostly blonde, fair, and blue-eyed. In fact, the majority of the southern Palestinians, descendants of the cave dwellers who until the last century practiced cave burials within the threshold of their dwelling place, who celebrate the Thursday of the Eggs and who categorize the year according to the “Christian” agricultural calendar, are a genetic pool in which the dominant phenotype contains the blonde, fair-skinned, blue-eyed alleles.

I am overcome with melancholy as I spot a blonde, blue-eyed lonely child in the courtyard of his house. The image of the forlorn child brings to mind the blowing sails of the ships carrying the Crusader nobility from their stronghold in Asqalan to Cyprus. The puzzled look in the eyes conjures the feeling of those left behind at that distant moment on the Palestinian seashore ... I wonder whether their phenotypes were more varied and darker then. Did the dominance of the blonde phenotype emerge through the customary laws of parallel cross-cousin marriage? By the same token, it is rather odd to see that the genetic pool of Beit Ummar, of people who construe themselves as descendants of a Crusader prince who converted to Islam more than seven centuries ago, is dominated by the typical Arabic features with white skin and jet black hair.

In fact, the Palestinian genetic pool is quite diverse. The phenotypes range from Negro African Palestinians of the Jordan Valley to dominant blonde Germanic phenotypes typical of the southern Hebron mountains.

\* \* \*

In order to survive, the Palestinian peasant no longer ekes out a living from his land but has become a “salary man.” From a life of mere subsistence, a constant struggle to survive off crops, the Palestinian now faces the ultimate challenge of survival on his land. The Israeli occupation presents an ever-increasing threat to his land, his home, and his family members. The alarming number of Israeli settlements in the West Bank, the building of settlement roads, and the construction of the separation Wall threaten our very existence in the homeland. The West Bank is increasingly becoming a sea of settlements with a decreasing number of Palestinian islands. The field of struggle has shifted from the level of economic subsistence, in which the peasant was embroiled with the mythos of the land, to the contemporary Palestinian nationalist struggle for survival and independence. A new nationalist mythos inflames the heart of the Palestinians.

My friends in Dura, Burj, Dhahiriyyeh, Kharas, Beit Ummar, Um Salamonah, Halhul, Kufor Al-Deek, Beit Surik, Safa, and Beit Rima are teachers, construction workers, professors, doctors, lawyers, factory owners, and business enterprisers. Since I have been adopted as a member of their families, I accompany them on their social visits. I have been to many homes. I am impressed. New economic resources have produced unprecedented cash flow that has altered the standard of living and produced a modernist consumer lifestyle. Running water, electricity, modern kitchens and bathrooms, Internet, and satellite are common conveniences. A house with a garden in an orchard and a car is the Palestinian dream.

Almost every village boasts a community multi-purpose cultural centre. Earlier this summer I attended two concerts, one in Deir Ghassan, a small village north of Ramallah, and the second in Ras Karkar, west of Ramallah. The traditional extended family compound, *hosh*, once reserved for weddings and family meetings, has now become the garden of the cultural centre and is used as an outdoor concert hall. Segregation of the sexes is maintained by personal choice; most of the women sat on the side while the men sat in the centre. The scene was impressive. Viennese and German musicians played the violin, flute, trumpet, counter bass violin, and piano. Though the instruments, melodies, and harmonies are totally alien to Palestinian folk music, the audience followed attentively as they enjoyed the music.

The globalization of the Palestinian village runs parallel to an uncanny process of decentralization. Cities that had traditionally functioned as religious, cultural, medical, or market centres for the villages had been undermined by Israeli occupation. The military siege imposed on Jerusalem, Nablus, Gaza, Qalqilia, Jenin, and to a certain extent, Hebron, has cut off the major Palestinian cities from each other and from the countryside. The urban economy has been ruthlessly undermined. Moreover the ancient traditional cities that once served as the anchoring cultural points have become marginal. The traditional peasant, urban, and Bedouin cultures of Palestine—now united against Israeli aggression—have developed through Internet and satellites a post-modernist decentralized “suburban” lifestyle.

In the new Palestine, the family survives as a cohesive unit. The modern extended three-generation family has moved from the single, 16-square-meter room, the cave, or network of caves, in which man and his animals shared the same roof, to a modern house. In addition to modern conveniences the modern house provides privacy. There are separate rooms for sleeping, watching television, and receiving guests. The expansive villa is composed of numerous private apartments for the sons and their children. Father and mother would keep the first floor and the children would, upon marriage, move into their own apartments on top. This vertical movement for some is accompanied by a horizontal movement within one large plot of land for others. West Bank village architecture reflects the varying economic status and ranges from simple handsome villas to huge houses of palatial grandeur. Irrespective of wealth, the extended family continues to function as a social economic unit.

Abu Jihad in Kharas worries about his 27-year-old son Jihad who left recently to go to Oman for work. He had worked in Palestine as a social worker but the minimal local salaries would barely pay his modest bills, had he to set up a home.

“Jihad is not happy in Oman,” Abu Jihad confided to me. “Over the phone he constantly complains of the impossible heat and difficult living conditions there. He grumbles that his work as a supervisor on a building site has nothing to do with his university training in social work.”

Until Jihad left the country he had remained, together with his 24-year-old brother Jamil, dependent on their father for their cigarettes and their telephone cards. Abu Jihad, who has a permit to work in an Israeli kibbutz, could not obtain work permits for his sons who, after graduation from college had odd jobs here and there. With his savings Abu Jihad started to build their future homes on top of his villa but ran out of money.

I had to be stern with him. I told him to put up with it and endure. These were my words, ‘Save enough money to finish and furnish the house. Only when you have enough can you return to the 1,000-shekel-a-month-job here.

The Palestinian dream is a home in the mountains on the edge of the village ... . Throughout the West Bank, small villas sprawl around the old village centre encroaching on the fig, olive, and grape orchards. The ideal villa is situated in the midst of the orchard and is surrounded by a rose with a garage. In the back of the house a small plot of land is reserved for *baali*, from the Canaanite God Baal—summer agriculture that depends on evening dew as its source of irrigation. The dry, hot days of Palestine have a wonderful unique ability to become moist with thick dew during the night. Heavy mist races in the night over the mountaintops leaving a wet blanket of dew underneath.

Palestinians prefer the taste of the traditional *baali* okra, tomato, cucumber, onion,

and cauliflower for commercial vegetables. Our grapes, our tomatoes, our olives, and our cucumbers ... all our products that depend on the *baali* type of irrigation have a unique taste that people cherish. With the confiscation of land, the arbitrary embargo imposed by Israelis on Palestinian crops, and expensive hand labour, the Palestinian has been alienated from his land. The little that is planted is for purely aesthetic reasons. The precious *baali* vegetables are exclusively reserved for home use and as gifts for friends. Despite the Israeli occupation, the confiscation of land, and the Wall, the Palestinian agricultural calendar survives. The relationship of the Palestinian to the land has not been ruptured. To the primordial mythos of the land a new discourse has been deployed—namely that of national resistance and the struggle for freedom.

\* \* \*

The village, the neighbours, and the family remain an infinite source of joy. The thick description of Palestinian culture encompasses the hermeneutics of dynamic procesual cultural adaptations to an ecological system in flux. But no one can be naively romantic and assume that the present Palestinian is a modern-day Canaanite.

The concept of the “unchangeable east” is a myth. There was never a period of true identity, a genuine moment that encapsulates a “cultural essence” or “cultural core.” Rather throughout history each period was merely a fleeting moment that in its transient fragility represented a momentary socio-economic dynamic adaptation of the culture to the available resources, thus ensuring the survival of the family within the tribe. Palestinians remain a tribal people. The locus of the extended family, the sub-unit of the tribe (*hamuleh*) in the Palestinian village, is invariably the *hosh*, the three-generation family living courtyard. Here the high school graduation parties, college graduations, engagements, and weddings are celebrated. The *hosh* is also the space where the four generations while away their summer evenings.

The overlapping of predominantly Christian and ancient Canaanite myths in modern-day Palestinian folk culture, which academic work reveals, is partial historical reality. This academic discourse, the search for classical roots, does not change the fact that the modern native discourse provides a narrative of Palestinian identity as “Moslem” and as “pure Arab.” The contemporary political ethnic identity as “Palestinian-Arab” informs one’s position *vis-à-vis* oneself, one’s community, and the outside world. The Palestinian exists on one level that he subjectively senses as real, whereas the ancient classical civilizations exist on a different plain to which he does not relate except on an academic or political level.

Cultural anthropology is a qualitative not a statistical interpretive science. Fieldwork, participant observation that refers to the total immersion with the object of study, is first and foremost an encounter between individuals. Knowledge is based on the inter-subjective experience with the other. Fieldwork is a love affair. Through time my interviews became personal social visits. Sarah, Um Nassar, Abu Ali, Abu Jihad, Hamdi, Abu Nidal, Mashhure,

Aladin, and Abu Omar are my friends whose human companionship I seek. My knowledge of the Palestinians is of friends and their extended families and, in the course of time, of the *hamuleh* and the village. "The Palestinian" does not exist as a generic type nor are my friends reducible to statistical figures. I have forged deep friendships with individuals who, through trust and love, have confided to me their knowledge of their culture and vice versa. Through friendship our common humanity was revealed.

The Palestinian, though he may fulfil the conditions of the classical tragic hero because of his unrelenting struggle for freedom, is not merely a symbol of heroism, courage, and struggle. He remains a frail sensitive human being. The Palestinian loves and hates, is merciful and vindictive, simple, easygoing, but extremely complicated and stubborn. He is subject to dramatic mood swings, is high-strung, haughty, and docile all at the same time. Proud, volatile, and easily irritable, nevertheless he remains extremely gracious and dignified. At times he may be frugal and miserly; at others he becomes ostentatious and enamoured with pompous display of wealth and power. Educated, liberal, and enlightened but also narrow-minded and limited in vision, he becomes compulsive. Deliberate, shrewd, and sly, yet the Palestinian is emotional, overly sentimental, and irrational. Nothing is strange about the contradictory feelings that agitate within the Palestinian; for individuality, the experiential subjective reality of each person, is nothing more than consecutive states of consciousness and contradictory feelings. The Palestinians, just like all other peoples, are complex, sentient, and sensitive human beings.

After years of fieldwork, I am still overwhelmed—as I am upon seeing a flashing comet—by the sudden encounter with a socio-religious ritual; a fossil from antiquity. In its light I am touched first and foremost by the very human complexity, frailty, and pathos of the Palestinian people.